

Impacts from the Art of Leadership Program: An Evaluation of the 4-H Current and Emerging Leadership Initiative



OVERVIEW OF INITIATIVE

In 2005, the 4-H Current and Emerging Leadership initiative was formally launched to aid in the development of leadership skills for 4-H professionals across the country. This effort is led by National 4-H Headquarters, CSREES, USDA in collaboration with the National 4-H Leadership Trust, National 4-H Council, the State 4-H Program Leaders and National Association of Extension 4-H Agents.

The success of 4-H in the 21st century is dependent upon the leadership guiding the system. Towards this end, the 4-H Current and Emerging Leadership initiative is designed to help facilitate and strengthen the development of critical skills necessary for achieving the 4-H vision, through a variety of professional development experiences. These experiences are targeted towards current State 4-H Program Leaders, new hires at the national level, and other 4-H professionals with an interest in understanding the scope of leadership in 4-H.

The intended outcomes of the initiative are for participants to:

- Learn and apply operational and strategic leadership concepts to 4-H youth development
- Be prepared to take on greater responsibility and exhibit strong leadership for years to come
- Build relationships for the future that reflect cohesion, trust, and continuity
- Positively impact the long-term success of the 4-H movement (Stone, 2005)

INITIATIVE IMPLEMENTATION & ACTIVITIES

In 2005, the Art of Leadership program was offered as part of the Current and Emerging Leadership Initiative. The longest and most extensive of the programs, the Art of Leadership (AoL) is an eight month course in executive leadership intended for individuals with fewer than five years of experience in key state 4-H roles. Professionals with a desire to advance into administrative leadership roles in the future are also encouraged to participate. AoL is punctuated by two separate, three day sessions held in February and September. The first session focuses on the results of a 360 degree leadership assessment. During the summer, participants are encouraged to participate in a reading program. Finally, the concluding session in the fall incorporates guest speakers and solidifies the participants' understanding of concepts covered during the year. Time is allotted for individual reflection, peer coaching, and small group work during both sessions. Participants in AoL:

- Develop personal leadership
- Reflect on their role as a leader in 4-H youth development in the future
- Develop a cohesive group to lead change in the future
- Participate in conversations on significant issues that could positively impact 4-H youth development in the future

METHODOLOGY

This evaluation was conducted using mixed methods, based upon Kirkpatrick's Levels of Evaluation (Winfrey, 1999). The Art of Leadership was evaluated at all four levels (Table 1).

Table 1 *Kirkpatrick's Levels of Evaluation* (Winfrey, 1999)

Level	Description	Appropriate Evaluation Method
1	Reactions	Quantitative
2	Knowledge, Skills, & Attitudes	Quantitative
3	Transfer	Qualitative
4	Results	Qualitative

Due to the difficulty in assessing the upper levels of Kirkpatrick's model (Winfrey, 1999), a qualitative approach was determined to be most appropriate to gather the in-depth data necessary to address whether participants were using what they had learned, as well as what the results of attending the program were once the participants returned home. A phenomenological approach was utilized to gather data.

Criterion sampling was used to select potential participants for an interview, based upon the location of participants in each of the four Cooperative Extension regions. The study population consisted of two cohorts: the "graduated" cohort of 2005, and the current 2006 cohort. Twelve individuals were asked to participate in the interview process. Six people were interviewed, while three were willing but unable due to scheduling conflicts and another three did not respond at all. All but two of the interviews were conducted via telephone; the remaining two were conducted in-person. Replacement participants were invited to be interviewed after four days of non-response from the original person contacted.

Data were analyzed using the constant-comparative method (Merriam, 1998) to develop common themes and draw conclusions, which were reviewed by two participants in AoL (one from each cohort) who were not part of the interviewing process. Minor revisions were made based upon their feedback.

FINDINGS

Six Art of Leadership (AoL) participants were interviewed. Four individuals - two from the Northeast region and one each from the Southern and Western regions - represented the 2005 cohort, while two individuals from the North Central and Southern regions represented the 2006 cohort.

When asked to describe expectations for AoL, improving leadership skills, knowledge and style, as well as networking, were identified as major themes by members of both cohorts. One participant mentioned being "anxious to meet other people from around the country" in similar career stages. Another mentioned a desire to "broaden my knowledge base about current leadership literature, strategies and resources-that whole field of organizational leadership." These comments are similar to those of other participants, with the exception of one person, who had expected to gain an increased understanding of the "hierarchical system" within CSREES from attending AoL.

Participants from the 2005 cohort typically felt that their expectations were being met. Comments ranged from "very definitely" to "yeah...all to a greater or lesser extent." One participant mentioned a desire to learn more about the "art" of leadership, versus the "science." The speakers received positive feedback, particularly Doug Steele, Director of Cooperative Extension in Montana. Also, participants enjoyed the summer reading program. The presence of representatives from the National 4-H Headquarters and National 4-H Council was welcomed; "an example of our national partners at their best." There was specific praise for coordinator Barbara Stone, who was described as being "in her element." The 2006 cohort members seemed optimistic that their expectations would be met, but mentioned that they were only midway through the process. Again, there was a single outlier from the 2005 cohort who said that his expectations had not been met, but mentioned that despite this, he still found AoL to be "personally rewarding."

The Art of Leadership did not significantly change the participants' personal visions of their roles as leaders for 4-H. Instead, many felt AoL validated the vision they had prior to attending, while one participant actually felt less prepared and overwhelmed by the challenges of leadership. Another participant stated that his attendance caused him to consider whether a role as state program leader would be appropriate in the future. However, a 2006 cohort member felt that discussing leadership visions was not a part of the first session and suggested that "if that's an intended outcome, it needs to be a more intentional part of training and conversations."





Similarly, participants indicated that their attendance at AoL did not significantly increase the amount of networking they did with members of their cohorts. Several people stated that there was not enough unstructured time to directly interact with their cohort members to establish trust in their new relationships. Instead, most of the networking that is occurring is a result of previously established relationships, sometimes due to proximity in regions, shared membership on national committees, or similarity in job structure. For those who are networking, common topics include professional development for staff and programming. Most notably, the 4-H impact studies conducted by Montana, Idaho and Colorado will be replicated for the first time in the Northeastern region as a result of networking at AoL.

A major component of AoL was the 360-degree leadership assessment. This is a tool that allows participants to compare their own evaluation of their leadership with evaluations that have been completed by peers, supervisors, outside contacts and employees. Participants spent a significant amount of time discussing the 360-degree leadership assessment during the interviews. One participant described the process as “shocking,” while another felt that waiting until the second day of the workshop to discuss the results was “nerve-racking.” There was a general consensus that less time should be spent discussing the assessment.

The clearest impact resulting from attending AoL was a marked effort by participants to improve relations with co-workers and staff as a result of participating in the 360-degree assessment. Comments included being “more personal with staff,” “more intentional about playing formal/informal leadership roles,” and “more conscious and more aware of my behaviors.” Participants thought it would be interesting to do the 360-degree assessment again in the future, to see if their behavior changes resulted in positive impacts. Additionally, some participants mentioned specific behavior changes as a result of the assessment. These included:

- One participant made marked efforts to increase recognition for employees by making phone calls and sending hand-written notes.
- Several participants sat down with their staff members and re-assigned job responsibilities to better match their employees’ strengths. One participant had his employees complete the *Now Discover Your Strengths* survey as the starting point for these discussions.
- Planning collegial staff activities.

Other impacts from attending the Art of Leadership were:

- “More emphasis and acceptance of professional development” for 4-H agents; a number of staff members in this state have since joined the Choosing to Lead program.
- Utilized the *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* book to develop a workshop; another participant used the same book at an annual Extension conference with program leaders.
- Development of a plan for state 4-H priorities and goals for the coming year; shared this plan with county agents.
- Enrolled staff members into the 2006 cohort after personal experience in 2005 cohort.

Overall, AoL was considered to be a “very commendable initiative” and an important effort by the national partners to meet the professional development needs of state staff.

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Art of Leadership excels at providing an environment for participants to focus and reflect upon their own leadership abilities, which is in line with the expectations of participants. This is a notable finding, given the critical role of reflection in experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Participants have taken the opportunity to improve their leadership very seriously, particularly as a result of the 360-degree assessment. Participants have actively sought to improve employee relations at the state office, which should have a positive effect on that office’s ability to serve agents at the local level.

The program was perceived to be less successful at helping participants to refine their leadership visions and did not provide the networking opportunities that some participants had hoped for when they enrolled. However, this may be related to the individual efforts that participants put into achieving these objectives. As one of the reviewers stated, “The responsibility for each of those falls to the participants to process the information provided and to practice the new skills desired.”

Evidence of changed behaviors as result of attending AoL was provided during the interviews, although it is too early to determine what the long-term impacts of these changed behaviors will be. Both cohorts strongly recommend the continuation of AoL. Members of the 2005 have demonstrated their commitment to the program by enrolling members of their staff into the 2006 cohort. This is a strong endorsement of the value of the program.

During the interview process, participants were offered the opportunity to provide their own recommendations for improving the Art of Leadership. While all participants clearly stated that the program should continue, their specific recommendations were to:

- Have AoL identify and focus more on the leadership techniques needed for individuals who want to move into administrative roles.
- Establish an intranet system for online discussions and postings.
- “Go longer and meet more.”
- Increase participant accountability with assignments, reports, or online courses to keep people focused once they return home.
- Tap into resident expertise—i.e. choose locations for educational purposes, such as the Stephen Covey Center in Salt Lake City.
- Continue encouraging involvement from the 2005 cohort with the 2006 cohort.
- Provide more information about 360-degree assessment prior to attending.
- Incorporate an opportunity to do a group project with the national program leaders (not an exercise, but actual problem-solving).

It is the recommendation of this independent review that the Art of Leadership should be considered a priority program by the national 4-H partners. Continued funding is a necessity to support AoL, which in turn provides a valuable, in-demand skills for the current and emerging leaders of 4-H. AoL should continue to build upon its strengths in the area of organizational leadership development, while considering the suggestions of participants to build an even stronger program for the future.

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